# The identity of a new profession: Examining the aegis of Traditional Chinese Medicine

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### Introduction

- In Canada, the rapidly growing practices of acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine have become professionalised under the banner of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) in recent decades<sup>1</sup>.
- Canadian sources of information<sup>2,3</sup> define TCM as a catch-all term representing the medical theories and practices developed over thousands of years in China.
- Yet, scholars in the United States<sup>4</sup>, United Kingdom<sup>5</sup>, Australia<sup>6</sup> and China<sup>7</sup> document that TCM refers to a political construct which originated in mid-20<sup>th</sup> century China.
- They suggest that TCM is an "invented tradition" that is different from how Chinese medicine was practiced in the ancient times.

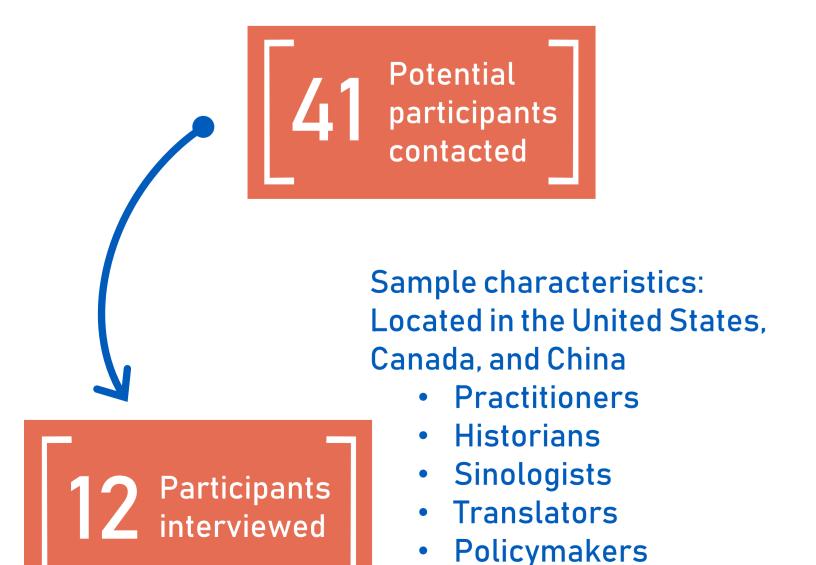
# Objectives

Our study investigates:

- the historical precedents leading up to the formal creation of TCM, and
- 2. how this relates to education, practice and regulation of this new profession in Canada.

### Methods

- Qualitative semi-structured interviews
- White and grey literature search to identify potential participants
- Interviews conducted through phone, e-mail, video chat or in-person
- Thematic analysis using NVivo software
- MacEwan Research Ethics Board approval



Medical anthropologists

Disciples of famous

masters

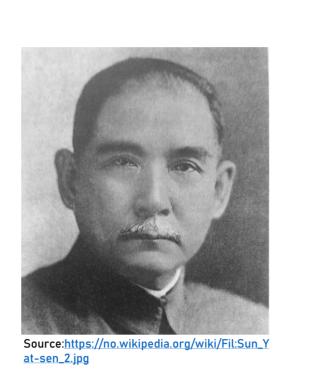
# Findings

#### 1800s

Over the past 2,000 years, a vast and diverse body of knowledge has accumulated in Chinese medicine.

## 1911

Sun Yat-Sen ends the Chinese monarchy. Pushing to modernize the nation, he proposes to abolish Chinese medicine.



### 1953-1963: Formalization of "Tradition"

- Severe shortage of Western medicine resources
- Mao revisits Chinese medicine
- To align with communist ideals, Chinese medicine is standardized, simplified, and hybridized with Western scientific thinking.
- Many Chinese medical lineages and traditions are omitted
- New hybrid medicine is officially coined "Traditional Chinese Medicine" (TCM), to distinguish it from modern Western medicine.

# 1978

China initiates an "open door" policy to reconnect with the world, enabling the exportation of TCM.

# The making of Traditional Chinese Medicine in the 20th century

### 1830s

Missionaries introduce Western medicine to China.



1949

Mao Zedong leads the communist party. He deems Chinese medicine quackery and seeks to eliminate it.



1956

Formal TCM colleges mark the start of institutionalized learning. This departs from the tradition of knowledge transmission from master to disciple.

#### 1968-1983

To address a rural health disparity, thousands of farmers underwent 3-6 months of medical training. Known as "barefoot doctors", they provided basic health care in the countryside.



# TCM is distinctly modern

- Participants in the US associated TCM with the and 60s.
- an umbrella term to represent the entire field.

# "There are certainly lots of achievements and benefits for China that came out of the TCM system, but we have a different history in the West. Standardization makes things simpler and easier to test, but in the clinic, we are losing lots of options. And that's tragic."

- Heiner Fruehauf, PhD, LAc

standardization of Chinese medicine in the 1950s

Those in Canada and China tended to use TCM as

# TCM is one style of Chinese medicine

Characteristics of TCM:

#### a) TCM is influenced by Western medicine

- Chinese medicine is symbolic language for functional concepts TCM looks at Chinese medicine
- through a scientific, materialistic lens Results in superficial understanding
- of Chinese medicine concepts

#### b) TCM is centered on organ theory

- Zang-Fu (organ) theory used in herbs
- Channel theory used in acupuncture
- Many other thought systems in Chinese medicine, e.g. 5 elements, 6 stages
- Standardization made organ theory the default framework for all therapies

#### c) TCM often lacks context

- Standardization creates educational efficiencies, but undervalues contextual knowledge that enables practitioners to adaptively interpret and apply concepts
- Relies on memorized protocols that lack a detailed explanation behind their use



# TCM is suited to the healthcare needs of mid-20th century China

- Designed to serve public health needs of a developing country with a large population
- Education meant to train the masses quickly
- Emphasizes infectious diseases and nutritional deficiencies not seen in developed nations
- Average Canadian seeks acupuncture for musculoskeletal or emotional conditions

# TCM is not the problem

- Although TCM has its limitations, it also has advantages
- Easily taught and learned
- Interfaces well with Western regulatory and educational systems
- Provides a shared vocabulary for the profession
- The problem is not TCM, but a lack of awareness of what TCM is, particularly within Canada

# Conclusions

- TCM is a standardized version of Chinese medicine created 60 years ago amid political turmoil.
- TCM served an important historical purpose, but many aspects of it are not suitable for the health care landscape of modern-day Canada.
- TCM remains (at least in Canada) a generic catch-all term for the entire field of Chinese medicine.
- The misconception that TCM is representative of the entirety of Chinese medicine has concrete consequences as provinces move forward with educational and regulatory decisions on TCM.
- There is an urgent need to increase awareness of what TCM is (and what it is best suited to do within a healthcare system) in order to promote transparent and robust dialogue surrounding this new profession.

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